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How Long Will the
Tall Trees Stand?



The uncertain future of
Southern California's
unique Channel Islands

A Park in the Western Sea

LARRY E. MOSS

WHEN AMERICAN CITIES are fortunate to preserve open space of any sort, it is incredible that within 100 miles of Los Angeles, perhaps the most thoroughly subdivided corner of the nation, we now have the opportunity to create a national park of exceptional beauty and unsurpassed scientific importance. This surprising and delightful prospect obtains because 20 miles of ocean separate the Santa Barbara coast from the Channel Islands. As a result, the islands today remain virtually undisturbed by the destructive processes that have claimed so much of Southern California. They also remain almost completely unknown to most people—dark silhouettes on the horizon cut from a sparkling field of blue.

The importance of preserving the Channel Islands was recognized in the *Pacific Coast Recreation Area Survey*, released by the National Park Service in 1959. After studying all significant remaining undeveloped coastal lands in Washington, Oregon, and California—many of which were found deserving of preservation—the survey concluded that “The Channel Islands collectively constitute the greatest single opportunity for the conservation and preservation of representative seashore values, including biology, geology, history, archeology, paleontology, wilderness, and recreation.” Since the publication of this report, we have made significant progress in conserving the California coast. Point Reyes National Seashore has been created, substantial coastal property has been added to the California State Park System, and the California Coastal Zone Conservation Act was passed by the voters in November of 1972 in order to curb spiraling coastal development. But the Channel Island National Park is still a dream, and the realities of 20th century America—second-home subdivisions for the wealthy and exploration for and development of oilfields—become greater possibilities with each passing day.

The four Channel Islands—Anacapa, Santa Cruz, Santa Rosa, and San Miguel—form a 60-mile chain stretching from near Point Conception to the city of Ventura, roughly paralleling the general east-west direction of this portion of the California coast. The islands are between ten and about 30 miles from the mainland, and the farthest distance between any two is just five miles. On a clear day, they so totally dominate the Santa Barbara horizon that the channel can seem like a large lake. A fifth island, Santa Barbara Island, is not properly part of the same island group (being located far to the southwest about 50 miles from Point Dume near Malibu), but would be included in



Deeply cut coves and rugged seaciffs typify the Channel Islands. Beneath a momentarily placid anchorage, divers discover a colorful sculpin (facing page) browsing for food.

Larry E. Moss is the Southern California Regional Representative for the Sierra Club.

any future Channel Islands National Park because it shares with the four northern islands many natural features, and forms with Anacapa the present Channel Islands National Monument. San Miguel (14,000 acres) is now under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Department of the Navy, which has used the island as a missile test range for years. In 1963, the Navy signed an agreement with the Department of the Interior for joint custodianship of the archeological and paleontological remains and natural values of the island. The two large islands, 62,000-acre Santa Cruz and 55,000-acre Santa Rosa, are privately owned and are therefore the keys to any substantial preservation program for the islands.

The Channel Islands are extensions of the Santa Monica Mountains, which rise from the concrete canyons of Los Angeles, sweep in a broad crescent west to the ocean, parallel the coastline from Pacific Palisades to Point Mugu and the Oxnard plain. Here, they drop away into the sea only to reappear ten miles offshore as Anacapa Island. About one million years ago, during the late Pleistocene, the sea rose and separated the Channel Islands from the mainland, a process that continued until about 10,000 years ago when the present separation was reached.

The first Europeans to discover the islands were Spaniards led by Juan Cabrillo who set foot on San Miguel in 1542. When the Spaniards arrived, they found the islands inhabited by Chumash Indians, who lived along the coast of central California and were

perhaps the finest basket-makers in North America. The Chumash plied the seas in caulked wooden boats perhaps similar to those used by their ancestors long before when they first colonized the islands. One carbon 14 dating of the charred bones of a dwarf mammoth (which survived on the islands long after it was elsewhere extinct) suggests that man may have lived on the islands 30,000 years ago, which, if true, would make them one of the earliest known human habitations in North America. The maximum Indian population of San Miguel has been estimated to have been about 2,000, but today only 100 persons live on the five islands of Santa Barbara, Anacapa, Santa Cruz, Santa Rosa, and San Miguel.

From the sea, the islands present an imposing spectacle of steep cliffs, deep coves, and sea caves. Less common are broad sandy beaches and slender sandspits. Except in a few sheltered places, landing is hazardous if not impossible. The topography of the islands consists of rolling hills, gentle plateaus, deep canyons, and rugged mountains, all typical of the Southern California coast. Aside from a few ranch buildings and evidence of overgrazing, the hand of man has been slight here. The interior of these islands may be the closest thing to real wilderness left on the California coast.

The climate of the islands is a foggy, stormier version of the Mediterranean climate that characterizes most of Southern California. During the winter rainy season, the islands are true emerald isles as the land turns green with new grass, but as on the

mainland, summer's drought changes the green to golden-brown. But it is spring when the islands are most beautiful, when they come alive with thousands of wildflowers—the strong hues of lupine and poppies and paintbrush, and the luminous yellow blooms of the giant sunflower (*Coreopsis gigantea*), which is unique to the Southern California coast and offshore islands. Santa Barbara Island contains the largest remaining stand of giant *Coreopsis*, and when these bizarre flower-trees bloom the gold is visible ten miles offshore. Like most islands, the Channel Islands have developed a distinctive flora of their own aside from that they share with the mainland. They have also provided refuges for relics, such as the Torrey pine, which are barely surviving elsewhere. Twenty-eight species of plants and several species of animals are endemic to the islands, and the animals and birds they share with the rest of Southern California often appear here as distinctive races.

But perhaps the most impressive and important feature of these islands is their varied and abundant marine life. The lush canopy of kelp that surrounds the islands supports a colorful array of life, and the nearly undisturbed tidepools are unsurpassed on the California coast. Several species of pelagic birds inhabit the islands and offshore waters, and on Anacapa, the brown pelican is making its last stand on the Pacific Coast north of Mexico. Especially impressive are the six species of seals and sea lions that frequent the islands, especially near the Point Bennett area on San Miguel, where they all breed. This area supports the northernmost colony of northern elephant seals, the southernmost colony of northern fur seals, and colonies of Guadalupe fur seals, harbor seals, California sea lions, and Steller's sea lions. Conservationists are arguing strongly that the breeding and pupping areas for these and other animals be protected from human incursion should the islands ever become a national park. Wildlife, wilderness, recreation, and scientific importance—the Channel Islands present a range of values second to no natural area in the country. The question is not whether the islands should be preserved—it is clear they must be—but how to best preserve them so that each of these values will be protected.

The history of legislation to estab-





It's hard to believe this fuzzy elephant seal pup will someday resemble the gnarled adult at its side. These outsized cousins of the circus "seal" were once common from Mexico to San Francisco, but by 1900 had been reduced by hunters to a single colony on Guadalupe Island off Baja California. In recent years, they have staged a remarkable comeback, especially on the sandy beaches of San Miguel (see photo on facing page), where the colony has increased from a mere 50 individuals in 1950 to more than 3,000 today.

lish a Channel Islands National Park is not particularly encouraging. Numerous bills have been introduced in both houses of Congress since 1963, but none of them have got out of committee and onto the floor of the house of origin, much less to the desk of the President. Campaigns to create national parks, particularly parks for which substantial private acreage must be acquired, are almost always of long duration and there is nothing unusual in that we don't have the desired park. Even so, the campaign to create the Channel Islands National Park has not been building the momentum necessary to push legislation through Congress, which often acts as though inertia were the best policy. The initial introduction of Park legislation in 1963 held great promise. Senator Clair Engle, fresh from the triumph, along with Congressman Clem Miller, of the creation of Point Reyes National Seashore, sponsored a bill that received strong endorsement

by then Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall, but the legislation quietly died in committee. Subsequent legislation has not fared any better.

One of the principal reasons the park proposals have not matured is the opposition of the present owners of Santa Cruz and Santa Rosa—the Vail and Vickers Company, which owns Santa Rosa, and the Gherini family and the Santa Cruz Island Company of Dr. Carey Stanton, which own separate portions of Santa Cruz. These owners claim they are providing better protection for the land than would the National Park Service and should therefore be left alone. They do indeed seem sensitive to the natural values of the islands. They allow scientists to do field studies on their property, and Dr. Stanton has permitted the University of California at Santa Barbara to establish a field station on his 55,000 acres of Santa Cruz. A superficial look at the situation might indicate little need to work for a Channel

Islands National Park when so many other conservation efforts need our attention, but recent events suggest that the future of the two large islands may not be so secure.

The Gherini family allowed exploratory oil corehole drilling on Santa Cruz Island by Union Oil in 1969, and only the failure to discover sufficient petroleum prevented the island from being developed into a working oil field. The Gherini family, owners of 7,000 acres on the eastern tip of Santa Cruz, have also proposed a subdivision for their portion of the island. The development would accommodate a population of 3,000 and would include a 200-boat marina, an 18-hole golf course, an airfield, and two major villages—Scorpion Anchorage and Smuggler's Cove—to host vacationing tourists. A large breakwater, dredged harbor, roads for subdivided lots, utility distribution systems, golf course, airport, marina—this pattern of "preservation" doesn't seem much different

to my unsophisticated eye from the 20th century sprawl that has engulfed much of the mainland in Southern California.

Vail and Vickers have allowed the Mobil Oil Corporation and the Tiger Oil Company to begin exploratory oil drilling operations on Santa Rosa Island, though State Attorney General Evelle Younger has filed an action to invalidate several of the permits granted by Santa Barbara County to Mobil Oil in apparent violation of the environmental impact report requirement of the California Environmental Quality Act. One of the Gherini family is an attorney, and he is the person who defended Mobil Oil's position in this case.

None of the above commitments to oil and real estate operations bodes particularly well for the future preservation of the Channel Islands by the present owners. Fairness demands that we state that neither oil operations nor residential development has yet occurred, but only because of fortunate circumstances.

There are numerous examples in the U.S. where private owners have provided excellent custodianship of natural places, excellent, that is, until the property changed hands or the financial profit from some development scheme became too alluring or the property taxes became too burdensome. Private ownership has again and again demanded that a substantial profit be turned on a piece of land and has proven incapable of providing the long-term preservation and stewardship which these superb islands deserve. The only difference between what has happened in much of coastal Southern California and what has happened in the Channel Islands is the time frame—geographical isolation has prevented substantial development until now and has presented us with an opportunity we should not ignore.

Some persons have indicated that Santa Cruz and Santa Rosa should not become a charge of the National Park Service because the service would encourage recreational overuse of the islands. The overdevelopments in Yosemite Valley or in parts of Yellowstone National Park are offered as examples to prove that the Park Service does not have the sensitivity to deal with the ecological systems on the islands. Most of the inappropriate development in national parks, how-

ever, is a legacy from earlier times when problems facing the park service were much different from today's. One can also point to national parks such as Kings Canyon that have remained mostly wilderness. According to National Park Service official Thomas Tucker, plans for a Channel Islands National Park would reflect a pure park concept of management for perpetuation of the natural values of the islands rather than for the accommodation of recreational activities. Certainly national park status, combined with wilderness designation of substantial portions of Santa Cruz, Santa Rosa, and San Miguel and the establishment of wildlife preserves for certain crucial areas, would provide the greatest degree of protection for the islands possible today. There have been other proposals for preservation of the Channel Islands, but to this date none have the degree of realism and completeness the national park proposal represents.

Congressional appropriations will be necessary in order to acquire the islands of Santa Cruz and Santa Rosa, and the establishment of a national park would provide the most realistic means for funding the acquisition. Carefully drafted Park legislation can provide for exploration of scientific, historical, and archeological values, guarantees of protection for the terrestrial and marine life, and perpetuation of wilderness. The Channel Islands are one of America's truly great natural places and present a spectrum of values presently unrepresented in the National Park System. There is no other area in the United States of similar park potential.

There is, of course, another threat to the Channel Islands that equals the development schemes proposed for Santa Cruz and Santa Rosa. Several oil companies have a firm hold on the Santa Barbara Channel and—despite the outcry and determined opposition of the public—show no inclination to relax their grip. The memory of the vast quantity of crude oil that bubbled from beneath Union Oil Company's Platform A in the channel during the Santa Barbara oil spill in 1969 still serves to inflame the people of Santa Barbara and provides a sobering reminder of the perils of offshore oil drilling and production. The oil companies still have their offshore leases, and the industry hopes and plans to produce the oil that is there. The de-

velopment of oil production on the federal portions of the channel has been substantially slowed as a result of the notorious 1969 spill, but Congress has been unable to come up with a permanent resolution of the present impasse.

One of the few bright spots in President Nixon's energy message to Congress on April 18, 1973, was his support for continued suspension of oil operations on 35 leases in the Channel. President Nixon asked that the Department of Interior continue suspension of operations in the Channel until January 3, 1975, or until Congress has had time to act on legislation to create an oil-free sanctuary directly opposite the city of Santa Barbara. Although the final form that channel oil legislation should take is unclear (because of the need to find some way to recompense the oil companies for their investment in leases that have proven oil reserves), it is apparent that legislation must soon move through Congress if the Santa Barbara Channel and the Channel Islands are to be spared the blight and hazard of oil production.

Despite the fact that the 1969 Santa Barbara oil spill sensitized the general American public to the issue of the environment, the problem of recapturing the federal leases in the channel, which were so thoughtlessly sold in 1968 for more than \$600 million dollars, has not drawn much interest in Congress. Many Congressmen from states other than California view the channel oil leases as a local problem; the establishment of a Channel Islands National Park could well be the issue to galvanize national interest and action on legislation to retrieve the oil leases in the channel.

Support from the Representative from the area, Charles Teague, is essential to success with both the park and oil issues, but he has yet to fully commit himself. In the past, he has proven an effective fighter for the environment when he puts his full effort into a campaign (such as he did when he helped defeat the notorious industry-oriented timber supply act of 1970, which would have essentially turned over portions of our national forests to the timber industry). Congressman Teague has introduced and supported legislation to rescue the channel from oil drilling operations, but—inexplicably—he has been most

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Islands (Continued)

cool to the establishment of a Channel Islands National Park. The questions that Congressman Teague raised several years ago about the possible effect of overuse by human beings on the natural values of the islands are valid, but answers to those questions have evolved, and he has still not responded positively. In fact, he is still asking the same questions and has done nothing except introduce legislation (H.R. 7392) to authorize a study of the feasibility and desirability of establishing a Channel Islands National Park. The feasibility and desirability of establishing a Channel Islands National Park have already been studied to death by the Department of the Interior—the need is not for another study, but rather for action to establish a national park that will adequately protect and preserve these nationally significant islands. It is time for Congressman Teague fully to ally himself with those who wish to see the Channel Islands preserved for posterity.

Senators Alan Cranston and John Tunney from California support the Park and control of oil operations in the Channel, and California Congressmen George Brown and Jerome Waldie have introduced legislation to establish a Channel Islands National Park. There is a legislative position to

rally behind, and now is the time to do so. The beauty, the isolation, the mystery, and the natural wonder of the Channel Islands deserve a place in our National Park System alongside America's other great natural places. Support for the park is needed from the Congressmen and Senators from the other 49 states as well as from California legislators. So the chances of success in these campaigns to establish a Channel Islands National Park and to protect the channel from oil operations really depend on everyone. Congressmen and U.S. Senators from outside California will only become informed on the issues if their constituents inform them and will only support our point of view if they ask that they so do.

Much of Southern California has already been overwhelmed by development, and a concerted effort will have to be made to shape these sprawling agglutinations of buildings and people into cities that are truly livable. But the Channel Islands have not yet been irretrievably touched by oil spills, urban sprawl, congestion, smog, and the rather strange American vision of progress, so there is something here that is really worth saving. The time has come to ensure that these mysterious and brooding Islands remain so forever.

Please write to both of your U.S. Senators and to your Congressman about the islands and ask that he or she co-sponsor and work for legislation to establish the Channel Islands National Park. The addresses are: House Office Building, Washington, D.C. 20515 and Senate Office Building, Washington, D.C. 20510.

